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SUBJECT: IRAQI PRESIDENT CALLS ACTION AGAINST PKK "FUTILE"
BUT OFFERS JOINT PATROLS ALONG BORDER

Classified By: Ambassador Ryan C. Crocker for reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Iraqi President Jalal Talabani told the Ambassador in a meeting October 22 that he thought fighting the PKK was futile and airstrikes against PKK camps would be ineffective, but thought strikes would cause little backlash in Baghdad. The Ambassador impressed on Talabani that the situation had never been more serious and that dialogue alone may not solve the problem. Talabani claimed that he had brokered a PKK ceasefire on behalf of Turkish PM Erdogan, whom the Kurds supported. He also offered to begin joint patrols of the Turkey-Iraq border should Turkey agree. He emphasized that he thought the PKK's actions were only helping the Turkish military, and again called on them to lay down arms. END SUMMARY.

Fighting is Futile

¶2. (S) The Ambassador began by emphasizing the gravity of the situation, and said something must be done quickly. The volume and severity of the recent PKK attacks makes it very likely that Turkey will conduct a Cross Border Operation (CBO). Statements from the GOI and KRG are appreciated, but Iraq (including the KRG) should firmly act against the PKK. Talabani replied that he is personally not intimidated by the possibility of a CBO - the mountains will beat the Turks and they will return home defeated and frustrated. Talabani said that although KRG President Masoud Barzani is easily agitated by Turkish comments to the media, Barzani had told Talabani the day before that "the PKK is definitely a terrorist organization - and a scourge on the Kurdish people."

¶3. (S) Talabani said the PKK have reduced their demands: previously, they fought for an independent Marxist Kurdish state, but now they are only calling for amnesty. He emphasized that a political solution was the only viable way to achieve a lasting peace - to fight them is futile since thousands remain burrowed in the Qandil mountains. Talabani detailed the extensive casualties suffered by Turkey, the PUK, and the KDP when trying to defeat them militarily PKK in the past. Talabani laughed that he fought Saddam Hussein's regime from exactly the same area and survived Baghdad's repeated offensives because of the extremely rugged terrain - the same is true now with the PKK.

Air Strikes Ineffective, But No Backlash in Baghdad

¶4. (S) Talabani told the Ambassador he did not believe air strikes would be effective against the PKK; they are well camouflaged and live in treacherous terrain including deep tunnels/ditches and caves. He thought that there would be little reaction in Baghdad if a limited strike was conducted, however his brother-in-law, Minister of Water Resources Dr. Latif Rashid, disagreed. Latif firmly asserted that any kinetic action against the PKK would likely prompt a nasty backlash, including immediate suicide and car bombings in

Turkish cities. If KRG involvement was perceived, then Iraqi Kurdish cities would be attacked too.

15. (S) Contrary to the belief that PKK camps may include women and children, Talabani and Latif (both seasoned peshmerga) asserted that no families existed; military-age PKK are not allowed to marry, do not smoke or drink alcohol, and live by a strict and severe code of conduct. They are zealots who live a very austere lifestyle and can survive throughout the year without supplies by living off the land. Practically none are ever captured alive by their enemies - instead they often commit suicide by throwing themselves from cliffs, they said.

Talabani Meets Erdogan, Brokers Ceasefire

16. (S) Talabani reported that he met with Turkish PM Erdogan on the margins of the Clinton Global Initiative conference in New York in late September. The meeting was very positive, he said. Talabani repeatedly emphasized that Erdogan is a leader who is popular with the Kurds (receiving 60% of their votes), but is being pressured by the hardline Turkish military. He said Erdogan has appealed to the PKK to come down from the mountains and discuss their differences with the Turkish parliament. To support Erdogan and prevent a full-scale CBO, Talabani said he was prepared to work with the Turks inside Iraq: if Turkey wants to initiate patrols, then he would dispatch peshmerga to join them. He said he would make this offer to Turkish FM Babacan the next day, during Babacan's visit to Baghdad.

17. (S) Erdogan asked Talabani in New York to leverage his influence to get a one-year ceasefire from the PKK. Talabani

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dispatched a special envoy, resulting in the PKK ceasefire announced earlier on October 22. The reaction to the ceasefire in Ankara was positive, Talabani insisted. He said the PKK planned to hold a press conference the next day from one of their mountain hideaways; Turkish military intelligence was reportedly aware of, and had sanctioned, the event. Talabani said the PKK has written two letters, one to Erdogan and one to Turkish Ambassador to Iraq Kanbay stating that they were ready to lay down their arms if a general amnesty is granted. Talabani said the ceasefire remained unconditional (despite media reports to the contrary).

18. (S) Talk of a press conference in the Qandil Mountains prompted a discussion on the locations of PKK camps and the possibility of choking off the PKK's supply lines and means of funding: Talabani and Latif insisted that the mountainous terrain meant that supply trails were impossible to block entirely. They were also at pains to describe the vast network of funding supporting the PKK. It reportedly stretches throughout Turkey and the remainder of Europe. They said every Kurd in Turkey and Europe pays a tax to the PKK, like the mafia: "if the tax is not paid you will find your shop or business on fire." They also have relations with and receive support from Iran, insisted Latif.

PKK should Abandon the Fight

19. (S) Talabani said those PKK fighting now are only serving the interests of the Turkish military. The Ambassador called on him to make that opinion known - that more violence is not helping. Talabani replied that he had said this in his statement two days ago. He read parts of his Asharq al-Awsat interview aloud:

"For some time we have been advising the PKK to abandon armed action. We have told them we are living in the era of globalization. Partisan wars are no longer acceptable or useful. We believe that the PKK should turn to political, parliamentary, diplomatic, and popular action instead of

armed action. In a speech that I recently gave in Sulaymaniyah, I openly stated that the Kurds do not believe that the PKK's military acts in Turkey or Iran can serve the Kurdish people's interests. Indeed they undermine their interests. We believe that armed action hurts democracy in Turkey and hurts PM Recep Teyyip Erdogan and the Justice and Development Party (AKP). This party is a new democratic feature that wishes to build a new Turkish society that makes room for Turkey's Kurds and the other ethnic groups in the country.

The AKP recognizes the existence of a Kurdish people and a Kurdish cause. It adopts a friendly attitude towards using the Kurdish language in the media. Furthermore, the recent parliamentary elections were free in the Kurdish areas and led to the election of patriotic Kurdish deputies to parliament. The AKP won more than 60 percent of the Kurdish vote, which means that they are happy with it. This means those carrying out armed actions against this party serve only chauvinist forces in Turkey.

Regarding the presence of PKK combatants in Iraq, our constitution clearly forbids the continued presence of foreign armed forces on Iraqi territory or using such forces to launch armed attacks on neighboring countries. But what can we do? We want the party to depart from the Kurdistan region and return to its own country (...) Iraq does not approve of the presence of the PKK combatants and their armed acts. It cannot tolerate them when they go into Turkey and kill people then return to our territory, thus providing an excuse for other forces to attack our areas. What we can do is condemn these acts but we do not have sufficient military forces to send them to the Qandil mountains to drive them out. We need our military forces to maintain security in Baghdad's streets and to fight terrorism. I wish to state that we are willing to operate within the tripartite committee with Turkey and the United States to put an end to the PKK's activities in Iraqi Kurdistan and to confine them to the Qandil mountains. At any rate, we do no want to allow them to benefit from the current situation."

Activating the 3 1

¶10. (C) Talabani and the Ambassador also discussed steps Talabani could take to reinvigorate the 3 1 (presidency prime minister) mechanism. Talabani said he would see Vice President Hashimi the next day and persuade him that he needed to cooperate. Talabani also would meet separately with the Prime Minister and raise the 3 1 as well as cooperation with Hashimi/national reconciliation. He told the Ambassador that he and President Bush had agreed to work

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on Hashimi and Maliki together.

¶11. (S) Comment/Bio Note: Talabani, Latif, and advisor Fakhri Karim spoke long and hard about the futility of confronting the PKK militarily. Talabani's offer of joint patrols with Turkey, while it likely does not go far enough, suggests he received the message that dialogue was no longer going to suffice. Whether he acts on that message or is able to convince the more hard-line Barzani family to act is yet to be seen. If Talabani and Latif are right about the absence of families in PKK camps, it could make air strikes more palatable to the Kurdish public, many of whom still regard the PKK as freedom fighters targeting an oppressive Turkish regime. Talabani was in a jovial, talkative mood and appeared no worse for wear following his trip to the Mayo Clinic. Though still on a diet consisting largely of a generous bowl of what can only be described as mush, he allowed himself several pieces of kabob during dinner. Talabani also told us that Kurdistan Regional Government Vice President Kosrat Rasul would return to the Mayo Clinic on October 23 for a checkup following his successful surgery to install a pacemaker two weeks earlier.

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